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Blue-Green Algal Bloom at Colonial Beach: Citizens Urged to Use Caution

(Saluda, Va.)—The Three Rivers Health District is advising people to take precautions when swimming, boating or recreating in the Potomac River at Colonial Beach, Va. as a result of a blue-green algal bloom, *Microcystis aeruginosa*.

Microcystis aeruginosa is a common species of blue-green algae that blooms in the fresh and low salinity portions of the Chesapeake Bay and coastal bays and tributaries. When the algae floats and forms a surface scum it may show the appearance of a blue-green paint floating or billowing near the surface. Ingestion of waters containing high concentrations of *Microcystis* can cause abdominal distress in humans and can kill dogs and farm animals if they drink significant quantities of the bloom waters.

“Algae are a natural and critical part of the coastal ecosystem,” explained Three Rivers Health Director, Dr. Reuben Varghese. “However, certain algal blooms can be harmful to humans and animals. We want to alert people of the situation and offer suggestions for how they can reduce the dangers of exposure to *Microcystis*.”

The Town of Colonial Beach has temporarily prohibited swimming at their beaches while additional tests are conducted daily. Once levels of the algae decrease and no longer present a public health concern swimming will again be permitted.

People should take the following precautions to reduce the risk of illness or discomfort related to possible exposure:

- Do not swim in or drink water from areas where a blue-green algal bloom has been identified, even if the water looks clear.
- If contact is made with problem water, simply wash off with fresh water. In some cases, skin irritations may occur after prolonged contact. If irritations persist, see your physician or local health provider.
- Keep pets and livestock away from bloom area as well as algal scum on beach. Blue-green algae blooms may contain a toxin that could be harmful to pets and livestock.
- This growth may periodically use up oxygen, causing fish to suffocate. Affected water may look like someone has spilled a blue-green to yellow-green paint on the surface of the water.
- Internal organs (innards) of fish and crabs caught in bloom waters should not be eaten. Caution should be taken regarding consumption of fish taken from waters where major

blue-green algal blooms occur. If you have cleaned fish taken from affected waters, thoroughly wash any skin that has come into contact with the fish.

The Town of Colonial Beach, in cooperation with the Three Rivers Health District, Department of Environmental Quality and the Department of Emergency Management is monitoring the situation. The algal bloom does not impact the Town's public water supply. As long as the current situation persists, testing of beach waters will continue and the public will be alerted of any changes in beach status.